

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
NORTH ADAMS**

**INFORMANT: MILDRED RIVERS
INTERVIEWER: DEBBIE KINSEY
DATE: MAY 20, 1988**

**D = DEBBIE
M = MILDRED
MALE VOICE**

SG-NA-T037

This is Debbie Kinsey interviewing Millie [M: Rivers] Rivers for the Shifting Gears Project and about Sprague and work, on May 20th, 1988 at her home.

D: Uh, first of all, just a couple of questions about your background just to get an idea. Um, can you tell me anything about your grandparents? Like their names, and where they lived, and their background?

M: Oh we always lived in North Adams here. My father worked in the Briggsville Mill. He was a woolen weaver. [D: Umhm] And my mother was an inspector in a union mill. She called it the cloth room. And my father's parents, I knew his mother. They lived on Central Avenue up here, but I never knew where any of them worked or anything. I never knew my grandfather. I knew my grandmother, but that's as far as the grandparents you know, go.

D: Yeah. How about your ethnic backgrounds?

M: What do you mean my ethnic background? My religion?

D: Your um, what countries your family came from?

M: Oh, I was born right here in North Adams. And I was born and brought up in North Adams here. We're real natives. Always right on Franklin Street too. We lived up the street on the top of the hill.

Male voice: But you're French Canadian and Irish?

M: My father was all Irish and my mother was all French. So we're French and Irish.

D: So your parents as well lived here their whole lives?

M: My mother originally come from Michigan, but she moved, she was here when she was a very young child. So she's always lived in North Adams. And my father, and my father did too.

D: Okay. Um, this is not a very nice question, but when were you born?

M: 1911, February 7th.

D: And you were born in North Adams itself?

M: On top of the hill where we lived before. 133 Franklin Street, yeah.

D: Do you have brothers and sisters?

M: No, just my sister Mrs. Coyne.

D: Umhm.

M: We had another sister who died at birth.

D: How about your schooling? You went to the areas [unclear]?

M: I went through Saint Joseph's Grammar and High School. Right down where the Saint Joe's Court is now.

D: The court, umhm.

M: I never went to that school though. I went to the old school. That's been (--) Do you remember the school that was torn down?

Male voice: Right in front.

M: And I was the last class to graduate from that old school. 1928 I graduated from the old school.

D: Did you go on to school after you got out of [unclear]?

M: No I didn't. No, I got a job in the Telephone Exchange, and I worked there for eleven years.

D: How about church experience?

M: Well just, we always belonged to Saint Francis and still do.

D: Yeah. So you started as (--) What did you do in the Telephone?

M: Just an operator at the local switchboard.

D: An operator? Yeah.

M: It wasn't dial then, it was a manual board. I never worked the dial board.

D: Really? Did you like your job?

M: Yeah! I did.

D: What kind of work did you do basically in a normal day.

M: Well just, just operating. You answered the light when you pick up the receiver and plug it in, and ring the number, you know. And then I left there and went into Sprague's, because my hours were so erratic that my daughter, I was never home with her. We lived upstairs where Danny's apartment is there. And I, so that's why I went into Sprague's. And uh, we at least had weekends and holidays, and things like that off, you know? So my sister and I went into Sprague's in 1942. We went in, we were going to work six months through the winter months. I stayed thirty-three years. [All laugh]

Male voice: A little different.

M: And she worked (--) See, she's six years older than I, so she left, she had to retire six years before I did. But she was out quite a lot. So she didn't have her full years that I did, because she was out on leave of absence. But I had thirty-three full years in Sprague's. Which was a long time when we went in for six months. [Laughs]

D: Change of plans.

M: I know it.

D: Have you been married?

M: Have I been married? [D: Yeah] Oh yes. I married 1931. My daughter was born in 1932.

D: How about your husband? What kind of jobs?

M: He was a steam fitter by trade. Of course he died in 1977. He's been dead eleven years now.

Male voice: It's making funny noises, but. Okay.

D: So why was it that you first started to work for Sprague's for the six months you planned to? What [unclear]?

M: 1942, it was the beginning, all of World War II was in the making. And a lot of the, they

sent notices to the women in town asking if they wouldn't like to go to work, but we decided we'd go anyway. And my uh, your grandmother, your great grandmother, your, your father was three years old and my daughter was ten. So my moth, your grandmother, your great grandmother was home. So she took care of them and my sister and I went to work. And we just stayed on.

D: Did you work a lot at Sprague? Like a lot of hours in a week, or something?

M: During the war we worked holidays and everything. [D: Really] We had to. There was an awful lot of overtime. But then of course we worked, we started at Beaver Street in a department called Vitamin Q. And then we moved down to Brown Street, where Sprague's is now on Brown Street. Well that was owned by Shapiro. I don't know if it was, I think it was motors then too. Something, a garage of some sort. And Sprague bought it from there. And they remodeled it to have an E Award Program there. And Excellence Award for performance. And after that we moved down to Brown Street, the Vitamin Q. We stayed there till about, well after the war years. And then we, I was transferred to Marshall Street. Then I was there ever since at Marshall.

D: How about the transition from working as a telephone operator and that, and then going to work at Sprague's? Did it seem(--)

M: I don't know. It wasn't ease, it wasn't hard. Of course I worked there so many years I did practically everything except rolling. We soldered, and riveted, and assembled, and whatnot. When we worked down at Brown Street it was the Navy Depart (--) It was under contract to the Navy. And they made diff (--) Well we made sound detectors for submarines, and also high range photography in planes. And of course after the war was over then the navy pulled out, and then of course that sort of, they took in other business then, regular business. And then that's when I got transferred to Marshall. And your mother, I don't know where she went. I kind of missed her for a few years. She got into an office, or a clerk in some department. [Male voice: right] So I didn't uh, we didn't work together, but then we got into Western Electric together and we worked there, all the rest of the years we were there we worked in the same room. That was Western Electric. Well first it was dry assembly, and then it went into Western Electric.

D: Was the work easy to learn at first?

M: No it isn't easy, it wasn't hard to learn. You're doing, you know, it takes time to get you know, trained on a job. But it was, you didn't need a college education to work on it, believe me. [Both laugh] But it was steady work and the hours was good for me, on account of the hours, you know. Because I would be home nights and weekends, and holidays. Because I was in the Telephone Exchange, I was never home on Christmas or anything. And it was rough you know? [D: Yeah] So that's why I quite that. It was a good job though on the Telephone Exchange. But it wasn't worth it.

Male voice: Yeah.

M: You know, in the long run.

D: What did you think of the conditions at Sprague's at first when you started, like the wages and (--)

M: Well they were okay. Yeah. It was an easy place to work at the time. And then it got, I don't know, years went by and naturally things changed. And then uh, I found an awful difference when they changed unions, and the CIO come in. And then things got a little more strict. And I can't say you did any more work. You always put in a good days work. Of course you're always on bonus. If you want to make a good pay you had to work, you know. But uh, I don't know, it uh, it changed a lot. But it wasn't a bad place to work. I've always um, well I wouldn't have stayed that long. [Laughs]

D: Yeah.

M: It was always a good place to work. [D: Yeah] That's if you made your, up your mind that you went to work and not fiddled around all day and worked, it was all right, you know. Did your job like you were suppose to then everything was fine.

D: Did you find like promotions, or pay increases, and benefits like that was, did you find it fair?

M: Oh I think so. Yeah, I think it was fair. And of course the pension plan didn't start. Uh, I can't tell you when it started, but when I got through we were getting 450 for every year. And that was uh, you didn't, you couldn't get over thirty years on a pension plan. [D: Umhm] So I worked three. I didn't have to put toward it after thirty years, but up to thirty years you put towards your pension plan. You put half and I think the company put, paid half. I can't be sure about that now, it's too long ago. But mine was 450 for every year. And your mother's was much less Dan, because she was six years.

Male voice: My grandmother.

M: Yeah, your grandmother. She got through six years before I did. So her pension plan was practically new then. So it was quite low. But now it's increased I understand about 12.50 and hour for the year. But it didn't go up. After you retired it stayed at that level. [Male voice: right] It stayed at that level right on, right through the years. But as far as promotions, you just go production work, that's what you were. You didn't get promoted on production work. You might have got a better job according to your ability, but you still were on production work. You know.

D: Umhm. Um, how about like in an average day? I know Dan's grandmother would joke about always running after work late and coming in late. [All laugh]

M: He knows. Always complained about it. I say, I worked six years after she got through and I was never late a day. But when she worked I was late every morning. [All laugh] I'd go down, five minutes to seven we were waiting for her, she was just getting out of bed. [All laugh] And you know, her boss never balled her out. We had, we worked in the same room, we had different

foreman, you know. Different departments in that one room. I got balled out every week for being late. [All laugh] Oh [Ozzie?]. We'd get to the gate and she'd say, "now you run ahead because you can walk faster than I can." "But Rose I'm already five minutes late. Why should I run now?" [All laugh] Oh she was awful to get started in the morning. Oh well, good old days. You know we had so far to walk. We had to walk from the main gate right through the whole length of that building, right down opposite [Veasy?] Street. And it took us maybe four minutes at a good rate of speed, you know, to get there. But we punched our clock near a room where we worked, not at the main gate. Only for that we wouldn't have been late so much. [All laugh] Oh dear!

And then they had a lot of get togethers if you wanted to go to them. They had Christmas parties at different departments and things like that. Banquets for five, ten, fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five years.

Male voice: Yeah, right.

M: Yeah. So we always had a lot going for the people. I've always thought it was a good place to work.

D: How did you get along with your co-workers?

M: Oh, I always got along fine with everybody. Some people you might like a little better than others. And especially when you got a bonus job and you were making it and she didn't. She couldn't figure out how you were doing it. And then there might have been a little friction there, but it never bothered me much. It's just people that didn't stick to their job. You know, they, they like to go off and take too many breaks and things like that. And then when they didn't make the bonus they had to complain, you know? If you wanted to make it you had to stay there the eight hours. You only took the rest periods you were allowed. [Male voice: right] If you took anymore, well that's up to you. If you didn't make your bonus that was your own hard luck. You wanted to work at it, you made it. [Male voice: yeah] Of course I always did and so did Rose. Your grandmother always did too.

D: So how did you get along with management? Was it easy, your bosses?

M: Oh no problem. No. I never had any problem with management.

D: What about others? Do you think [rest of comment unclear]?

M: Well like again, like I say, if you do your job they've got nothing to complain about. And if you don't, well you're apt to get called on the carpet occasionally, but it's your own fault I would say.

Male voice: How about when you were late? Would that cause any permanent problems, or just you know, the weekly slap on the wrist.

M: No. Course you are allowed seven minutes before you were docked. [Male voice: right] And of course they expect you to get in. You're taking advantage of that seven minutes, because

that's off the production. That's seven minutes being lost, you see? So they would want you there on time of course. But you wouldn't get docked unless you were over seven minutes. No, they just want to know what the reason was, and why you were always late.

[All laugh] I couldn't say it was Rose's fault. Oh dear! I don't know now what excuse I gave. Oh dear! I know when I went to school I was always late, because I had to feed the darn chickens every morning. Rose had those problems too. [Male voice: Yeah] Oh well, good old days is [unclear]. Of course Sprague's, I don't know now how it's like since it's gone to smaller rooms and all, but Donna there doesn't seem to have any problems. She gets along fine and the wages are great because she's conscientious and sticks to her job too, you know? So I guess it's okay. I don't know how it is inside the plant now. It's too many years ago. Things have changed a whole lot in all those years. Because I, I retired in '75. So I'd been out my goodness, thirteen years. So of course a lot of the departments moved after that. Some moved to California. [Filter?] went to California. I think it's still there. That's where Edmond worked. Uh, great uncle. That would be a great uncle of yours. You would never know him.

Male voice: I was going to say Edmond doesn't ring a bell.

M: You know Frank Rivers? It's his brother, and my husband's brother. [Male voice: Okay, okay] They both worked. They uh, Edmond worked in Sprague's. He went there as a foreman. And they moved to a lot of different places. One went up to Barry, Vermont. And I think one Keene, New Hampshire. I don't know if they're still there or not though. Lost track of all of those places. I can't think of where else they went. Because we had them all over the states then. [Male voice: Right]

D: Um, well how about like union activity? You were a member of the union, right?

M: I was a member of the ICW.

D: Umhm. Were you an active member at all?

M: No. I can't say I, I went to the meeting or anything like that, but I belonged to the union. You didn't have to unless you wanted to. But I always belonged to the union. No, excuse me. And then of course CIO put bid to come in. And that was voted in and the local union out. And, but you still belonged to it. You still didn't have to, but we always belonged to the union. I figure if it's there you ought to belong to it. So.

D: What did you think of the unions?

M: Well I like, I liked the local union. And I, I say to this day, if the local union stayed so many departments wouldn't have moved out. [D: Umhm] Because they were out on a ten week strike. I don't know if it was over ten weeks or not. And then in the meantime they moved a lot of them out. So we lost a lot of work in North Adams due to that. And if we kept our own union in we'd have done just as well. This [unclear], or any other way I would say. But that's only my opinion. [Male voice: Right] I really think it kind of went downhill after that strike.

Male voice: That would be the, the um, CIO Strike?

M: Yeah, when it got in, yeah. Of course that's when they voted it in. They were out all of this time on strike. One was battling with the other trying to get in as far as I can remember. Umhm. In the meantime like I say, a lot of the departments there moved out. Went down south, or other places. [D: What] But it was (--)

D: Sorry. What did the unions um fight was for and [unclear].

M: Well it's mostly benefits and I suppose, wages and different things like that. Vacations and a lot of different things.

D: Did you think that they were fair in asking for some of those things?

M: I really didn't know much about it. I really can't say. I never had too much to do with the union, but I thought it was too bad to loose all of that work you know, for nothing. Really it was for nothing. Because people went back for I'd say almost what they were going to get with the local union. But they were out so long they were almost forced into going back, you know? And I think it's a lot of wasted time all of this striking and everything. I can see it's necessary in some places, but I can't see it in too many places. I don't think the worker ever wins, really. I think they loose so much they never make it up.

Male voice: Yeah. [phone rings] I'll pause it. I'm just started the tape player.

M: Oh.

D: Uh, did you ever participate in any of the strikes, or walk-outs, or (--)

M: Well no. I mean uh, you really had to go out, but I didn't. A lot of them went back in, you know, they went through the gate and did get back in and work, but I didn't. I stayed out until the strike was settled. I didn't want to get into that [fracas]. [D: Yeah] Because you know, tempers run pretty high in something like that, you know? Of course I, see my Tom was working in Sprague's that time of that strike too. Of course he was out ten weeks. I think it was ten weeks at that time. It could have been longer.

Male voice: Tom is your son-in-law?

M: Yeah.

Male voice: For the record.

M: Yup, he worked there at the time. The one from, we had a strike on Brown Street right after the war, and that ran I think ten weeks. Now I'm not sure about the one on Marshall, the later one. I think it was over ten weeks, but I can't remember just what it was.

D: Um, how do you think(--) I know working a lot it must have somehow affected you know, your home life and [unclear] your family.

M: But see it wasn't easy. [Laughs] There was a lot to do. You know, you had to take care of your family and do your housework and squeeze in all of these extra hours of work an all. It was, it was hard, because you never had much time to yourself. You know, if you wanted to keep everything going you had to really work at it. It took a lot of time and effort.

D: Was it worth everything?

M: Well it had to be. You had to have it in order to get by, you know, live on really. You hadn't had much choice. So you did it and you just got into it. And I think you got into a routine and you stayed. Really. [Chuckles]

D: How about um, you know, friendships? Say, you know you say you got along really well with co-workers.

M: I've got a lot of friends I still see occasionally that I worked with. Yeah, quite a few of them. [D: That's good] Not too often, but I do see them once in awhile and we chat on the phone. And I've kept in touch with a few of them. There's a few of them I always get, sent a card to them for their birthdays and Christmas. And they do to me though I don't see them. You know we've kept in touch like that, little notes or something. Make a lot of nice friends I think. Some nice, some not so nice. And they think that about me too. [All laughs]

D: Um, how about during the depression? You know, what was it like to be living in North Adams [unclear] working?

M: Well it was like everything, anywhere else I would think. You know, I remember we had stamps, food stamps I think. We had to stay within our limit on food stamps. And some things were scarce, got a little hard to get. Everything seemed to go along all right. I guess you got to go along with it, or make the best of it, you know. And then you manage. [Male voice: Umhm] You have to.

D: Did it seem that there was a lot of trouble with employment in North Adams during that time?

M: I don't think so. No, I don't think there was any problems, because during the war everything was booming anyway. You know, nobody was looking for work. If they wanted to work they could work. They could always find something to do, because there was so many well, Army and Navy projects and war projects going on, that everybody could work if they wanted to. But it wasn't any hardship as far as working goes.

D: [Says something in a whisper]

Male voice: What?

M: You awful tired? [Laughs]

Male Voice No.

D: Uh, how was working at Sprague different from like around you know, at first when you started during the war and everyone was united kind of I guess with the war effort, and then afterward was it very different?

M: After the war? [D: Umhm] Yes, in a way it was, because uh, a lot of the work during the war was on day work. You were expected to put out enough day work, but you weren't on bonus. Some were and some weren't. Now when we'd go work in Brown Street the Navy paid half of our wages and Sprague's paid the other half. But you see, as soon as the war was over and the government pulled out, we still did the work, but then we were on bonus. Sprague's paid it all. So then we were on bonus then. It was up to us to make our own wages. If we wanted to work hard enough we made more. But it was about the only change as far as I know. The work stayed the same. Maybe different kind of work come in, you know, but it was all well, same assembling and soldering and all that sort of thing.

[Conversation is going on-speaking too softly-cannot transcribe]

Male voice: Do you want to take a break, or would you like to keep going?

M: How much more is this?

D: Not very much.

M: I'll go ahead if you do. You don't want to take a break and come back later, do you?

Male voice: Nah, we might as well keep going.

D: You stopped working since 1976 was it?

M: I retired in, I was sixty-five in 1975. At that time you had to leave at 65.

D: How about like in, from the fifties and sixties when you were working there then. You know, I'm sure Sprague's you know, policies kept changing and situations too.

M: Well you know it's a funny thing. When you're working in a place any length of time things change so gradually that you go along with them. I don't think, I don't remember any changes actually. It's been a long time ago. [All laugh] No, I think you just go along with them when you're working at something like that. You know, you go along with the changes. You just adapt to them and you just don't pay that much attention to them.

D: Did your job change very much?

M: Mine did, because I did a lot of different jobs. Did an awful lot of different jobs. I couldn't tell you the amount of different jobs that I did. Some were easy and some weren't.

D: And what you did, then conditions they must have like been improving and stuff.

M: Well of course they were always coming up with new methods of like, of doing things. Like changing the sizes. And I, I remember most working over the years, is a unit, whether it's resistor, or capacitor, or whatever it was, they were larger. And then as the years went on the same thing about that big was doing the job of a great big one like that, you know? They change in size so much. Everything got smaller, but did the same thing. So that's, that's a lot of, there was a lot of changes you know. A lot of things were changed in that respect.

D: What was hard about the work really?

M: I don't think anything was that hard you know, to learn and do. Some jobs were hard than others. Some were standing and some were sitting, and some you could do either, you know.

D: What did you find most enjoyable about working there? [M: What?] What did you find most enjoyable? I mean if you worked there for thirty-three years you must have [unclear].

M: You know I don't know as you can call it enjoyment, but you just went along and worked. I can't tell you! [Laughs] Some things were frustrating though. If you couldn't, you know, if you couldn't get it, couldn't hit your bonus, or something like that, and you were trying hard and you didn't make it, you got kind of frustrated after awhile. But things always worked out in the end. Of course at the end I had kind of a hard job the last few years I worked. I always worked on uh, they called it air testing, and it was a man's job. And I worked with this man. And if he had too much work I would help out. Well when he retired I fell into the job and it wasn't easy. But I worked on that, oh I think I must have worked on that for about ten years. It was a hard job. It was about the hardest on I did I think.

D: How about union activity? Did that change very much later on? With the CIO I'm sure it changed, but did it [unclear]?

M: No, they had their regular meetings and things, which I never went to, because I never went to the others. You know, so I can't say I know what they really do. The uh, the retired, now I have a golden retirement card that I could go to all the meetings and everything, you know, but I'd never gone to them. Even when I was working I never went to the meetings. Just a few uh, when it comes to the voting for a union, or something important like that I would go to that meeting. And I'd go especially to have a vote on it. Well I could go vote for anything. That's about the only things I took part in. And I didn't go to any of the meetings, or tried to stay out of trouble. [Laughs]

D: What do you think general thoughts were then about union? Later on, you know, did people generally, the workers there, did they generally support them?

M: Well I don't, I don't really know. I can't tell you much about the unions. I can't tell you much about the unions. I really don't know. Cause I said, I didn't go to the meetings, and I don't know that much about them. But I don't know, it seems to me when the union got in that's when it started to fall apart though. I could be wrong too, but it struck me like that anyway. I always

kind of thought that uh, I think the people demanded too much some times. You know actually they can't go along with everything they demanded. [Male voice: Right] So I don't know. They maybe were right and maybe they weren't. I can't say if they were or not. I really can't.

D: How do you feel about retiring at you know, sixty-five when you left?

M: I think it's time to retire at sixty-five. When you work thirty-three years, forty-four years when I counted my eleven in the Telephone Exchange. By that time you're ready to retire, believe me. [Laughs] And you don't, in those forty-five, forty-four years I never had a leave of absence, or was out sick. [D: Really?] Yeah. So I had my whole, every year counted that I was there, you know. And of course when Rose, my sister and I went to work you had to be twenty-eight before you could join the pension plan.

END OF TAPE